



**Defending public service is an integral part of
defending the right to education**

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Privatizing of education or depriving of education?

The right to education is universally recognized, both by specialized international organizations and by the governments of the member states. However, in practice, this recognition remains without effect in most countries, especially with regard to girls education. Universal primary education is enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights¹⁰, and, along with equality between boys and girls, represents one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) formulated by the United Nations Organization¹¹. Yet, owing to education sector budget cuts imposed on countries of the South by neo-liberal policies, and the resulting negative consequences (inflexible salaries, flexible work contracts, run-down infrastructure, crowded classrooms...), the means allocated to ensure full enjoyment of this right remain woefully inadequate, while public discourse on the matter is reduced to mere wishful thinking. Such neo-liberal policies threaten the right to education, and more generally the right to development, in its economic, social and cultural dimensions.

More often than not, the promotion of education is proclaimed as necessary only in so far as it leads to privatization. Failed and contested, the educational part of neo-liberal policies continues all the same to be implemented in its various forms. One of the most surprising aspects of these policies is the priority accorded to state financing of private education. Public money is massively used to distribute vouchers to help students pay for private schools, to finance out-sourcing of services to private suppliers or to support, through subsidies and tax breaks, the expansion of private universities. At a time of neo-liberal globalization, the state is being mobilized in the education sector to support private education. The total expenditure on private education throughout the world is over US\$ 2,000 billion¹². Benefits expected by transnational corporations's from a pushed marketization of the educational sector are huge.

More and more in the countries of the North, education systems are segmented, divided into two different levels. In the countries of the South, subjected to structural adjustment plans, the increase in the rate of schooling of children in primary and secondary schools often witnesses a concomitant rise in the number of the poorest who

¹⁰ Article 13 of the Covenant.

¹¹ Read the 2005 UN Report defining the Millennium Development Goals. Report available on: www.un.org/millenniumgoals/.

¹² See: Alternatives Sud (2004), *L'Offensive des marchés sur l'université*, CETRI and L'Harmattan.

abandon schooling –already in primary school. Generalized access has not translated into a “democratization” of schooling, which remains highly unequal. The effects of privatization in education are the most negative for the poorest, who are marginalized or excluded outright. Private markets *deprive* the poor of real access to education services, just as it denies them satisfaction of essential needs such as water, food or health... Discrimination carried out by the state against the public education system not only risks dissuading youth from pursuing their education, but also risks encouraging a division among students according to socio-economic lines as well as along the lines of certain particularities, such as ethnic origin, skin color or religious belief.

The support of neo-liberalism by dominant economic theory

This tendency toward the privatization of education, in the current dominant economic theory –neo-classical economics–, is based on the idea that education would be a private matter tended to by individuals. It is worth recalling that the neo-classical economists’ aim is the understanding of socio-economic facts using as a starting point the behavior of *homo oeconomicus*. At the heart of this paradigm, the theory of general equilibrium of the markets seeks to determine the way choices can be coordinated – choices presumed to be free, rational and motivated by personal interest, with exchanges being carried on by a great number of agents. Unlike goods produced by the market for private use and whose exchanges are mediated by prices, a certain number of goods, called public goods, have the peculiarity of being the object of collective consumption. By their nature, they cannot be produced nor allocated by market forces. Their production must be entrusted to the state. Knowledge belongs in this category. Education is rather perceived as generating positive externalities for the community. By externality one means an economic effect that results from an economic exchange between agents, without monetary compensation set by market prices. In dealing with externalities, neo-classical theory accepts state intervention for reasons that are similar to those concerning public goods: they are similar to goods without a price (or a price equal to zero), thus abundant. Triggering an excess of demand and an insufficiency of offer, they require state intervention, for prices cannot work to bring about market adjustments. In spite of this theoretical tolerance of public intervention, most neo-classical economists support, in a purely ideological way, private education. Milton Friedman (Nobel Prize in economics, 1976) set the stage for this, claiming that state intervention beyond educational services spontaneously offered by the market “*is not necessary*”.

Expounded by the neo-classical economist Gary Becker (Nobel Prize in economics, 1992), starting in the 1960s, the theory of human capital is a micro-economic analysis of the behavior of training. It considers education to be an investment in a particular capital, inseparable from the individual who chooses to be trained, all based on a calculation of the income that this training will bring the person in question in the future owing to an increase in the productivity of his or her work. This theory can be criticized on many counts. First, it defines education as a commodity that can be accumulated in function of market price mechanisms. This analysis was used particularly to oppose free education, the argument being that the absence of a sale price corresponding to the real cost would only entail deficiencies in the public sector.

Then, it postulates a chain of relations of causality between training, productivity and income. Yet these relations are far from being verified in reality, owing to labor market dysfunctions (unemployment, informal economy, discrimination...), to divergences that appear between productivity and remuneration, and to possible wage differences between similar levels of productivity. Finally, this theory loses itself in the fiction of the freedom of the individual choice of agents, which ignores social relations of domination. It legitimizes income inequalities by justifying them as due to differences in work productivity, themselves, in turn, explained by differing levels of qualifications, thus, *in fine*, by the more or less significant “preferences” of individuals for education. The rich deserve to be rich because they have made the choice of studying –without being paid during their studies. The problem is that the poor not only do not have the means to finance higher education, but have no other choice than to sell their labor force in order to survive.

The micro-economic concept of human capital is also used by the neo-classics, in the new theory of growth, to explain the motors of technical progress. This macro-economic theory explains the growth as an endogenous phenomenon, rejecting exogenous factors, in particular owing to the accumulation of knowledge or of human capital by private agents who are reacting to market prices and motivated by profit alone. This vision of education corresponds to the neo-liberal project¹³. It recognizes, of course, the motor role of knowledge in economic growth, but, at the same time, it also denies its nature as a public good or a common patrimony of humanity, not to mention its collective and social dimension of sharing, thus reducing it to a commodity which is privately appropriated and remunerated. This is the contradiction in which Robert Lucas (Nobel Prize in economics, 1995), known for his work on the role of human capital in growth, finds himself entrapped. In his view, the state should be mobilized only to support market regulation of education through dominant capital and to stimulate the private accumulation of knowledge with an exclusive view to profit making¹⁴.

Knowledge and education according to the World Bank

These micro- and macro-economic analyses have served as theoretic bases to the recommendations of the World Bank regarding education and knowledge¹⁵. According to this institution, “*economic and social well-being*” is to be attained through “*free trade*” and, within each economy, by “*free competition*”. In the matter at hand, the strategy of the World Bank comprises three main points: *i*) Privatize the information and telecommunications sectors: access to these services would be blocked by inefficient state monopolies and by regulatory régimes that dampen offer. It would be possible to do away with these obstacles. In order to do so, a regulatory framework that favors competition would have to be put in place –its expansion preceding its

¹³ See here: Herrera, R. (2006) « The Hidden Face of Endogenous Growth Theory », *Review of Radical Political Economics*, vol. 38, n°. 2, pp. 243-257, New York.

¹⁴ In 2000, Lucas ranked, along with Becker and Friedman, among those who supported with enthusiasm the economic program of George W. Bush, whose educational policies were opposed to the principle of a public education system.

¹⁵ World Bank (1999), *World Development Report*, Washington D.C.

privatization. *ii*) Dismantle public research in order to subject it to the laws of the market: in order to encourage public laboratories to respond to the need of the productive sector, research institutes should be converted into share-holder corporations. *iii*) Promote private education: if it is appropriate to encourage the development of education, the best way to do this would be to support private sector action, and to provide incentives to the private sector in order to invest massively in teaching –even to the point of helping the poor pay for their schooling. The World Bank accomplishes the feat of grouping together the objective of a boom of the “*knowledge market*” and that of reducing “*inequalities in knowledge*” while ignoring the idea of a struggle against the inequalities in wealth between classes and between countries undergoing redistributing policies.

The recommendation of access to basic education formulated by the World Bank can be essentially explained by the fact that education is, according to the experts of this institution, a privileged place of investment in human capital, thus, also, through the impact it has on productivity and income, a powerful vector of poverty reduction and of greater equity¹⁶. Equity is defined as the “*equality of opportunities*”, to wit not as equal investment but as equal opportunities to invest¹⁶. This is the argument used by the World Bank in its attacks on state interventions, which are judged authoritarian and giving rise to uniformity, as well as in its attacks on organizations representing teachers. This criticism leads it to advocate the setting up of public-private partnerships, for which the private sector perimeter is extended beyond the parents, the communities and the non-governmental organizations to include also transnational corporations, which have at their disposal the means to force national choices along lines that favor them and reinforce neo-liberalism. According the World Bank, the guiding principles of these partnerships are participation, targeting and decentralization¹⁷. These principles should, however, be reformulated, for the concept of “human capital” can be interpreted differently from the neo-classical theory or the World Bank’s approach: not to reduce the qualified work to capital, but to enhance the full development of the person. Breaking the neo-liberal war machine of education privatization is not enough; the bases of alternative education policies must also be determined.

For a right to education made real by public service

First of all, participation should concern the teachers, asked to evaluate the work that has been accomplished, to identify the most urgent problems, to reflect on the means of solving them, and to formulate collectively proposals destined to the official authorities. Suggestions should be broadly diffused and discussed. The involvement of the students and their parents should also be as active as possible, in order to improve the quality of the education system. There will be real participation only if those at the grass roots level organize it. Preferential treatment of the poorest populations should be distinct from the targeting through personalized assistance that reinforces an already universalized social security system. A balance must be found between the necessary

¹⁶ World Bank (1999), *Education Sector Strategy*, Washington D.C.

¹⁷ See: Mulot, É. (2001), « De la Compensation à la réforme sociale », *Revue Tiers Monde*, n° 168, Paris.

decentralization, for the respect of cultural differences, and the indispensable centralization of the education system and of the social policies implemented by the state –which is a necessary condition for an effective reduction of the inequalities and a concomitant development of equity. Equity will have no meaning or dimension unless it is based on a real search for equality as a goal. The equality of opportunities must be the means of realizing equality of conditions, and not an end in itself¹⁸. All students should thus benefit from identical conditions of education through a homogeneous level of preparation in all schools to which they have access, and this independently of their origin, confession, place of residence, family situation or the position their parents may occupy in the division of labor.

Education is one of the keys to successful development strategies and a means of realizing the objectives of socialization, fulfillment of the human person and equality. The principles that should underpin the democratic educational policies are its public character, its universality and its cost-free access at all levels. It is a question of building not only better educational systems in terms of access and quality, but also a world based on the recognition of the non-commercial status of education, of scientific knowledge and of cultural productions. In spite of the dwindling of resources, the problems must be solved without privatization and without calling into question the public character, the universality and the cost-free access of education. The defense of the right to education is rooted in the defense of public service.

¹⁸ Bayart, P., R. Herrera and É. Mulot (2006), « L'Éducation dans la révolution », *Cahier de la Maison des Sciences économiques de l'Université de Paris 1*, Série rouge du MATISSE, n°. 33, 21 p., June.